



## Spotlight on Iran

July 26 - August 9, 2015

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### Overview

- ✓ Several Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters were killed in Syria and Iraq.
- ✓ The Iranian Majlis (parliament) has been considering a bill to grant Iranian citizenship to non-Iranian refugees fighting in the service of the Islamic Republic in Syria and Iraq.
- ✓ The Supreme Leader's representative in the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force said that anyone killed defending Syria deserved to be rewarded more than Iran-Iraq War martyrs.
- ✓ Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah noted Iran's commitment to the organization, even after the signing of the nuclear agreement.
- ✓ Musa Abu Marzouq, deputy chairman of Hamas' political bureau, claimed Iran had stopped providing financial support to Hamas because of the crisis in Tehran-Hamas relations.

### Senior Iranian Officials' Statements on Iran's Regional Involvement

- Interviewed by Iran's Arabic-language TV channel Al-Alam, Amir Hossein Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for the Arab states and Africa, discussed regional developments. He repeatedly criticized the Saudi military attacks on Yemen, calling them "a strategic mistake." However, he added that Iran sought to restore its relations with Saudi Arabia to the status quo ante.
- Regarding the situation in Syria, he said that regional strategic circumstances had changed in favor of the Syrian regime and that most of the regional players previously regarding the war as a way to solve the Syrian crisis now understood the situation demanded a political solution. He said Iran and Syria had consulted about solving the ongoing crisis in Syria during the visit of Walid al-Muallem, Syria's foreign minister, to Tehran (August 4-5, 2015).

- He claimed Iran opposed the measures taken against the Kurds by Turkey, although Iran considered Turkey's security as a matter of paramount importance. He claimed the fight against terrorism and ISIS necessitated coordination with Syrian and Iraqi governments, and no country had the right to violate the sovereignty of its neighbors.
- Regarding the possibility of Iran's cooperating with the United States to fight ISIS, he said Iran had no such plans and would continue to support the Iraqi and Syrian governments against ISIS as they requested. He claimed the United States employed a double standard when dealing with terrorism, and that Tehran did not cooperate with Washington regarding ISIS.
- He also discussed Bahrain's claims about Iranian involvement in smuggling weapons and planning terrorist attacks in Bahrain, claiming the allegations were false and their only objective was to justify the regime's oppression of its civilians. He said that if Iran were intervening in Bahrain's internal affairs the situation there would be completely different, and that if the Bahraini authorities had proof of Iranian intervention they should present it (Alef, August 3, 2015).
- Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Supreme Leader's advisor for international affairs, told a meeting of the commanders of Iran's law enforcement forces that Iran was the strongest state in the region militarily and security-wise and that it would continue to advance as a country with regional might and influence in the international arena.



**Ali-Akbar Velayati**

- Velayati criticized the positions of the Western and some of the regional countries on Syria, noting that countries that had never experienced democracy could not claim

that the Syrian president had not been elected democratically. He said the enemy was incapable of carrying out its plots to destroy the axis of resistance in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon (Tabnak, August 4, 2015).

■ On August 4, 2015, the official website of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei posted an infographic entitled "180-Degree Disagreement," which illustrated the serious differences of opinion between Iran and the United States regarding regional Middle Eastern issues.

■ The infographic showed, for example, that American policy in Iraq was based on a desire to weaken and overthrow the central regime in Baghdad and to divide Iraq, while Iranian policy was represented as seeking to strengthen the regime in Baghdad and preserve Iraq's territorial integrity. American policy towards Palestine was represented as supporting "the criminal baby-murdering Zionist regime" while Iranian policy was represented as in favor of "holding a national referendum [of the original residents of historic Palestine] and returning the Palestinians to their land." American policy towards Syria was represented as seeking to overthrow the Assad regime, which was fighting Zionism, while Iran supported the regime, which was committed to fighting Zionism.

■ The infographic's timing was not random and it unequivocally expressed the Supreme Leader's position against changing Iran's approach to the United States in the wake of the nuclear agreement. In recent weeks Khamenei stressed his opposition to any change in Iranian policy towards the United States, regardless of the agreement with the West. His position is the result of his ideological worldview, based on a complete lack of trust in the United States and rejecting any possibility of normalizing relations with it on the one hand, and on internal political considerations based on the desire to curb President Rouhani and assuage the government's hardliner opponents' fears of the nuclear agreement and its consequences for Iran's foreign and domestic policies.

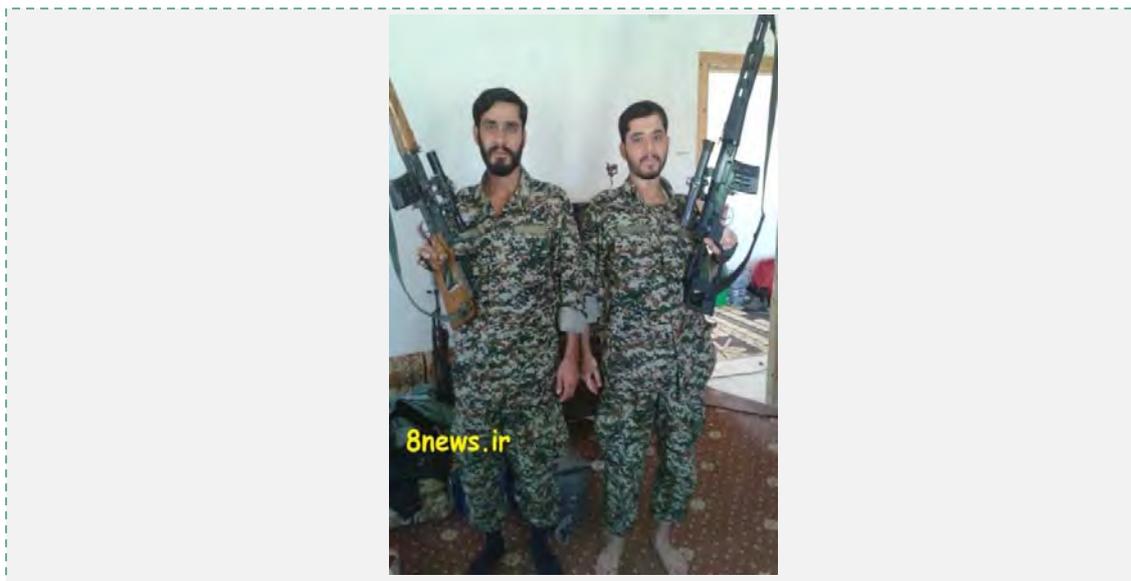


The "180-Degree Disagreement" infographic as it appeared on the Supreme Leader's website.

- Hassan Firouzabadi, chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, called Turkey's attacks on the Kurds in northern Iraq a strategic mistake. He said the Kurdish forces were fighting ISIS and the Turkish attacks against the Kurds would make it easy for terrorists to reach Turkey's borders. He also criticized the support of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey for ISIS, saying that sooner or later, their own security would be threatened.
- On August 3, 2015, an editorial in the conservative daily paper Javan claimed that Iran's ability to support its regional allies would be greater following the nuclear agreement. The agreement would increase the Iranian regime's regional and international might despite the agreement's inherent weaknesses. The editorial mentioned the moral and sometime material support Iran provided for the resistance front, regional stability and the fight against terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. It also noted that according to the Iranian constitution and the Qur'an, the Iranian Republic was committed to supporting Muslims in other countries and "the oppressed of the world."

### Iranian Intervention in Syria

- Two IRGC fighters, brothers Mostafa and Mojtaba Bakhti, were killed in the Syrian city of Tadmor (Qasemsoleimani.ir, July 28, 2015).



**Brothers Mostafa and Mojtaba Bakhti**

- On August 3, 2015, a funeral was held for Ali Hassani in Arborz Province west of Tehran. Hassani, killed in Syria, was an Afghan volunteer fighter in the ranks of the IRGC. His body was recently sent to Iran. The Iranian media did not release details about the date or circumstances of his death (Fars News Agency, August 3, 2015).



**The funeral held for Ali Hassani in the Arborz Province**

- On August 4, 2015, Mohammad Reza Ataei, who was killed in Syria, was buried in Karaj in the Alborz Province. The date of his death was not made public (Defa Fars, August 3, 2015).
- Ali Jannati, minister of culture and Islamic guidance, meeting with Adnan Mahmoud, the Syrian ambassador to Iran, said Iran was prepared to broaden its cooperation with Syria in culture, communications and the arts. Jannati praised the

Syrian army and people for their fight against radical Islamic groups (IRNA, August 2, 2015).

■ The Iranian Majlis has been considering a bill to grant Iranian citizenship to non-Iranians fighting in the service of Iran, and to their families as well. According to the bill, non-Iranian Muslims living in Iran who fought and were killed or injured in the service of Iran and the Islamic Revolution (and their families) could be granted Iranian citizenship if certain conditions were met. Two of them were a minimal period of time spent in Iran and a recommendation from the IRGC (Majlis website, July 14 and August 1, 2015).

■ Behind the proposed law is the active participation of Shi'ite Muslim fighters (especially from Afghanistan and Pakistan) in IRGC's fighting in the Syrian civil war and the campaign against ISIS in Iraq. Several thousand Shi'ite Afghan refugees living in Iran have been enlisted by Iran as volunteers since 2012. They are paid a monthly salary and enjoy other benefits, and fight in the Fatemiyoun Battalion in Syria alongside the Syrian army and Hezbollah. This past year the battalion lost dozens of fighters in Syria, among them the battalion commander, Ali-Reza Tavasoli, who was killed in an attack in Daraa Province in February 2015.

■ Hojjat ul-Islam Ali Shirazi, the Supreme Leader's representative in the IRGC's Qods Force, speaking at a memorial ceremony for IRGC fighters killed recently in Syria, said that anyone killed defending the holy places of Islam in Syria had a special status and was worthy of a greater reward than those who died in the Iran-Iraq War. He claimed the West's objective was to keep Iran from supporting the struggles of the people of Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq against terrorists, because the West was afraid of the support received by the resistance front and of its fighting spirit (Fars News Agency, July 31, 2015).

■ This past week an Iranian newspaper published an article praising the Iranian fighters in Syria. It told the personal stories of several of them (Iranians and Afghans) who had been killed in Syria, lauding their willingness to sacrifice their own lives. One of the people interviewed for the article was a publisher who was writing a book documenting twelve fighters (mostly Iranian and some Afghans) from Isfahan who were killed in Syria. He said most of them belonged to families whose members had fought in the Iran-Iraq War and regarded themselves as continuing along their path (Mehr News Agency, August 3, 2015).

■ Statements made by senior Iranian regime officials and articles in the Iranian media praising Iranians fighting in Syria may reflect the regime's increasing efforts to enlist public support for its involvement in Syria and Iraq. The Iranian regime is aware of internal public sensitivity to the growing number of Iranians killed in Syria and Iraq and is trying to prevent increased public criticism of Iranian involvement in the campaign by stressing its importance for Iranian national interests and the ideology of Islam and the Islamic Revolution.

### Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ The body of Hojjat ul-Islam Mohammad Mousavi-Naji, an Iranian cleric killed in Iraq on July 19, 2015, was returned to Iran and buried in the city of Qom on July 26, 2015. Mousavi-Naji, a member of the Basij militia, was sent to the Iraqi front as religious preacher to the Iraqi Badr fighters operating under the aegis of the IRGC. He was killed in the region of Al-Mazraa south of the oil city of Baiji when the vehicle he was riding in hit a mine planted by ISIS forces (Abna News, July 26, 2015).



**The funeral held in Qom for Mohammad Mousavi-Naji**

■ The Kurdish media reported that Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had again visited Irbil and Soleimaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan, where he met with senior Kurdish officials. A source in the political bureau of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) said he had advised them to avoid internal strife in Iraqi Kurdistan and to focus on fighting ISIS (Fars News Agency, August 5, 2015).

■ Hassan Rouhani, the president of Iran, speaking at Sanandaj in Kordestan Province, said that Iran was committed not only to defending itself but also to defending regional security. The Iranian nation, he claimed, did not only defend

[Iranian] Kurdistan, but Baghdad and Irbil in Iraq as well. He said that were it not for Iranian support, Baghdad and Irbil would have fallen into the hands of terrorists. As Iran had defended Sanandaj from terrorists, he said, so would it defend Dohuk, Irbil and Soleimaniyah (Website of Hassan Rouhani, July 26, 2015).

■ During a visit to Iraq, Mohammad-Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, said Iran would continue to cooperate with the Iraqi government in its fight against "extremism and terrorism." He also met with Shi'ite religious figures in the city of Najaf, among them Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most senior Iraqi Shi'ite cleric (ISNA, July 27, 2015).



**Mohammad-Javad Zarif during his visit to Najaf**

■ Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed Ayatollah Seyyed Mojtaba Hoseyni as his representative in Najaf, Iraq, replacing Ayatollah Hajj Sheikh Mohammad Mehdi Asefi, who died two months ago. Before his appointment he was the Supreme Leader's representative in Syria (ISNA, July 28, 2015).

### *Iranian Intervention in Sudan*

■ The Sudanese government confirmed that Iran had frozen its funding for a number of large infrastructure projects in Sudan. Ahmad Qasim, the Sudanese infrastructure minister, told a press conference that among the projects were the construction of a bridge from the island of Tuti to the Bahri region, and a water facility in Omdurman. He said the Sudanese government had been forced to cancel contracts it had signed with Iranian companies after Iran reneged on its commitment to finance the projects without providing an explanation.

■ The relations between Iran and Sudan worsened during the past year after Sudan expelled the Iranian cultural attaché last summer and ordered the Iranian cultural centers to be closed, claiming they were disseminating Shi'ite ideology in Sudan, which is a Sunni country (Asr-e Iran, July 17, 2015).

### *Iranian Intervention in Lebanon*

■ During a televised address on July 25, 2015, Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah stressed Iran's commitment to the organization. He claimed Iran had not abandoned Hezbollah, as it had not "sold" the organization after the nuclear deal had been signed. He said Hezbollah had a special status in Iran and the bond between them was a bond of blood. "We loudly and clearly say that we receive material and financial support from the Islamic Revolution and we are proud of it," said Nasrallah (Kayhan, July 27, 2015).

### *Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena*

■ Interviewed by Al-Jazeera TV, Musa Abu Marzouq, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau, claimed that Iran had completely cut off its financial support for the movement. He claimed that both support for the civilian Gazan population and military aid for Hamas had been suspended. That, he said, was because of the crisis in the relations between Hamas and Iran that broke out following the onset of the Syrian civil war. Musa Abu Marzouq claimed Hamas was attempting to improve relations with Iran.

■ Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Supreme Leader's advisor on international matters, said the recent visit of Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal in Saudi Arabia had not influenced Iran-Hamas relations. He told Al-Jazeera TV that the relations between Iran and Hamas were based on friendship, and for that reason Iran did not involve itself in the movement's internal affairs. He denied reports about tension between Iran and Hamas, saying that relations between Iran and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad were also good (Mehr News Agency, August 4, 2015).

■ Iran strongly condemned the murder of the baby in the village of Duma (near Nablus). Ms. Marziyeh Afkham, spokesperson for the Iranian foreign minister, said the event was additional evidence of "the terrorist nature of the Zionist regime" and the institutionalized violence in Israeli society. She called on the international community to put an end "Israel's crimes" (Press TV, July 31, 2015).

- On August 4, 2015, an anti-Israeli demonstration was held in Qom to protest the murder of the baby.



The demonstration in Qom (Fars News Agency)

### Iranian Religious and Propagation Activities around the Globe

- Senior Iranian cleric Ayatollah Nasser Makarem-Shirazi recently wrote a letter to Al-Azhar sheikh Ahmad al-Tayeb. He proposed a meeting of Shi'ite and Sunni clerics to discuss obstacles to Islamic unity and ways to strengthen Shi'ite-Sunni unity (Press TV, August 4, 2015).
- The letter was part of an ongoing effort made by Iranian religious establishment to promote a dialogue between Shi'ites and Sunnis. After the coup in Egypt in 2011 senior Iranian clerics sought to strengthen cooperation between the Shi'ite religious establishment in Iran and the Al-Azhar Institute in Egypt. The activity is part of Iran's growing recognition that its regional involvement has increased the suspicions of the Sunni Arab states and made it difficult for Iran to consolidate its regional influence.
- However, in reality, Iran continues to encourage Shi'ite dominance and gives preference to establishing its influence among Shi'ite Muslims who are supposed to be the standard bearers of the Islamic Revolution. Iran's dual policy is manifested by the parallel activities, held under Iranian regime aegis, of *Dar al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhahib al-Islamiyya* (House of Reconciliation between the Islamic Sects) and the Ahl-ul-Beyt Association. While Dar al-Taqrīb promotes a dialogue between Shi'ites and Sunnis, the Ahl-ul-Beyt Association which is subordinate to the office of the

Supreme Leader works to disseminate Shi'a, even encouraging Shi'ite subversion in the Sunni world.